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The SATURDAY Gazette

PEOPLE

SATURDAY, JULY 29, 1978

Meditation: You have to buy before you fly

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of the Gazette

The Transcendental Meditation movement has become the most successful "self-help" program of all, with well over two million people — most of them in North America, having taken the TM course.

In 1958, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi was the only teacher of TM — also called the 'Science of Creative Intelligence' — but now there are more than 15,000 officially sanctioned teachers.

Meditation *a la Maharishi* has infiltrated all walks of life. It has been adopted by many business firms because of its supposed powers of coherent, organized thinking.

Athletes — such as football great Joe Namath, the New York Islanders hockey team, and Philadelphia Phillies all-star shortstop Larry Bowa — have found that it improves reaction time.

Pop music stars — such as the Beach Boys, Chicago and many more — say it helps them handle the rigors of the road.

Correctional officers have found TM useful in rehabilitating prisoners (the biggest success for TM was found in the hard-core Folsom Prison).

And some doctors use TM to help patients solve such middle-class problems as alcoholism and pill-popping.

110 countries

The TM organization — with outposts in 110 countries and headquarters in Seelisburg, Switzerland, where its own research university is located — has grown to the point that it has overtaken the U.S. Army as the world's leading user of videotapes (according to the Ampex tape corporation); it has now become cheaper for the TM movement to set up its own tape-manufacturing factory.

The movement's opulent gold-lined booklets and publications are produced by its own printing press. And TM — which calls itself the World Government of the Age of Enlightenment — is Swissair's biggest customer, due to its teaching programs in Switzerland.

TM's claim of levitation — "flying" — by its most experienced meditators is generally greeted with skepticism, but meditation has been accepted by many scientists as a valid program for calming down.

It is a simple technique that involves 20 minutes of meditation every morning or night — meditation that can be done as effectively in a crowded subway as alone in a silent room. It is an uncomplicated technique that simply requires a comfortable place in which to sit. Chanting out loud is deemed unnecessary, and after one's first lesson, one is automatically considered a "meditator."

Among other findings, scientific tests have demonstrated that TM can lower the metabolic rate, reduce the heart rate, stabilize high blood pressure, and reduce cigarette use. And it has beneficial effects on insomnia and bronchial disorders.

Now, according to TM organization figures, almost 800 communities in North America have a population which includes one per cent or more meditators.

Stress is the reason.

Our North American technological society has become the breeding ground for stressful citizens, and TM promises to relieve stress.

George Riddell, head of the investment department at Standard Life in Montreal, says he first came into contact with TM after being dragged by a friend to hear Dr. Hans Selye give a speech about stress.

"I knew I had problems, but I wasn't sure of their name. After hearing Dr. Selye I knew they were stress-related.

"The following weekend I was initiated in the TM program and I've been a most loyal practitioner ever since. In the last four years I might have missed four meditations.

"I used to drink more than was good for me — although I didn't think so at the time. Now I'm down to a little wine with my meals. I used to smoke two packs of cigarettes a day, now I don't smoke at all.

"The thing that intrigued me about TM is that giving up these things did not require any enormous effort or will power."

Peter Staniek, executive officer here for Ports International, says his four staff people are all meditators, besides being students of the advanced courses — all paid for by the company.

"I can only say that it was the best fringe benefit we ever introduced. The reason for it was purely from a pragmatic point of view . . . if you have a harmonious coherent orderly individual he will be more productive."

Dr. Ashley Deans, a scientist at Maharishi European Research University in Switzerland, was working on his doctorate in experimental space science at York University, when he first read about TM.

"I read an article on NASA which said that Rusty Schweikart, the back-up commander for the Skylab project, had invited the Maharishi to come to Houston to lecture. So I decided there was no harm in looking into it.

"I had no interest in meditation before this — until I read the scientific research. The research on improved reaction time interested me because I was into sports, especially tennis.

"Two months after taking the course, the first thing I noticed was that I woke up feeling less tired. I enjoyed my sports better, and I could study longer. I knew that as soon as I finished my PhD I wanted to get into the research aspect of TM full-time."

The Maharishi says that whenever one per cent of the population of an area takes up TM, crime rates drop.

It may sound silly, but some experts buy it. Dr. Steven Milstein of Université du Québec says "there's a solid explanation for the one per cent concept. You can take any kind of people who are organized and functioning together and look at their impact on society. That's what our whole political lobbying system is about, isn't it, a small group of people influencing a larger whole. You create a wave that ripples throughout society."

The "wave" may have hit Verdun, where 1.2 per cent of the population meditates, according to TM figures.

Verdun police director Claude Laforture told The Gazette that the crime rate there has indeed decreased by 30 per cent since 1976.

"However," said Laforture, "I'd like to think that this is due to the preventive patrols of my men.

"I've heard about this TM movement and I know they have an office here. They might have something to do with the decrease in crime, but I really don't know.

A veteran Verdunite has a more simple explanation: "When I grew up there, we'd steal anything we could get our hands on.

"Now my generation has moved out and because Verdun is known as a good-living, low-rent area, you'll find that a lot of your so-called intellectual college-educated people are moving in, and they're not the types to be interested in petty crime."

This is the problem with TM's hype. The Movement claims credit for social trends that may have nothing to do with TM, and this can tarnish the legitimate, scientifically-demonstrable benefits of meditation.

Milstein claims not to be affiliated with the TM movement, other than being a meditator, although his name is listed frequently in newspaper ads for introductory lectures on the subject (for which he receives no payment). He conducts most of his research on the effectiveness of drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, but recently measured the impact of TM on the human auditory system.

"We've observed fantastic increases in hearing sensitivity or threshhold."

He also reflects upon the relationship between TM and the heart.

"Our heart has so many beats before it wears out. Let's say a perfectly functioning heart is not subject to stress. Now let's say you reduce the number of beats per minute by 10 or 15 per cent. That means the heart can work that much longer without wearing out. You tend to find the whole metabolism slowing down. The body has to work less to accomplish more."

Milstein talks about the comparisons between drugs and meditators.

"My three years of research on marijuana smokers showed that all the so-called claims of these people about 'increased creativity' and 'increased perception' simply weren't there. There was basically a decrease in performance ability.

"The available research on TM users shows that this is not the case with meditation. You get increased clarity.

"You never hear anybody who smokes dope or pops pills talking about an increase in clarity. I think that increased clarity leads to expanded perception."

And the flying?

What about levitation? Says Deans: "The idea of levitation is such a phenomenal change in man's understanding of his relationship with the universe that it naturally meets with resistance. In fact, if you look at all the great discoveries of the past, they've all met with resistance.

"What we are doing is asking scientists from around the world to perform their own experiments on advanced meditators.

"We don't give demonstrations to the public because we feel that would not be quite as dignified and will create more controversy."

Who is this Indian holy man who wants to save Quebec?

• The Gazette's Juan Rodriguez questioned the founder of TM in a recent trans-Atlantic telephone press conference.

His Holiness Maharishi Mahesh Yogi — founder of the World Government of the Age of Enlightenment and promoter of the Transcendental Meditation technique — is not worried about Quebec separatism.

The province is one of four areas in North America chosen for a blitz three-month campaign currently under way in 20 countries — a campaign in which thousands of TM teachers are spreading the word on "invincibility to all nations."

The Maharishi doesn't care which language one speaks.

"It is difficult to predict," said the Maharishi over the phone from his "International Capital of the Age of Enlightenment" at Seelisberg, Switzerland, "what will be more suitable to the people. Whatever happens, one thing is for sure. Whatever is life-supporting will remain, whatever is life-damaging will simply fall off.

Ask the Maharishi why he chose Quebec as a model for the Ideal Society, and he will tread federalist waters.

"In Canada the natural tendency is to be harmonious as far as language is concerned. We thought we would choose two provinces, one French and one Canadian (British Columbia), one on the side of the Atlantic, the other on the side of the Pacific.

Also chosen were the states of Washington and Rhode Island.

The Maharishi's words emanated from a long-distance squawk box at a press conference held in the Press Pavillion of Man & His World, to announce the campaign in Quebec.

The room was filled predominantly by local TM "governors" — well-scrubbed, neatly dressed types, many wearing yellow "Invincibilité Quebec" buttons.

They listened with rapt attention to the voice of their silver-bearded spiritual leader, whose age is estimated to be about 60 (Maharishi does not like to talk about his past; thus, nobody knows his exact age).

This much is known about the little holy man at the other end of the line: He was born in India's Central province into a warrior caste. While taking a degree in physics at Allahabad University, in 1940, he became interested in a more orthodox form of enlightenment. Upon graduating, he set off to the Himalayas to study with Guru Dev, a swami who had left home at the age of nine to seek enlightenment.

According to legend, Guru Dev ordered Maharishi — which means Great Seer in Sanskrit — to find a technique to send TM to the masses. Maharishi concluded his studies with his Guru in 1953 and two years later was teaching TM in southern India.

In addition to Lear-jetting about the world with his message, he likes to give his wide-eyed teaching progeny pep-talks over long-distance telephone.

The Maharishi's plan for "invincibility of all nations" is simple — as simple as plunking down $150 for an introductory course in TM. And his spiel reflects this simplicity.

"In this scientific age, the functioning of nature is more known to us than in the past. Today we know there is a ground state of all the laws of nature, in that state of least excitation of consciousness . . . which is the source of all activity, the home of all the laws of nature . . .

Standard message

He sounds like a recorded message.

A local TM guy wrests the long-distance microphone away from me, and says earnestly:

"Maharishi, we have received messages of support from many mayors in Quebec of such districts as St. Leonard, St. Laurent, Verdun, Lachine, St. Hubert, Outremont, Montmagny, Hull, Rimouski, Trois Rivieres Ouest and Cap de la Madeleine."

"Beautiful, very beautiful," exclaims the Maharishi.

"Offer beautiful golden roses from me to all these mayors."

After 45 minutes, long distance telephone bills being what they are, the Maharishi signed off and a local spokesman said proudly: "Thank you for coming here to this great event. It's been a very beautiful afternoon."

Doug Storey, Kerry Bell and Danielle Laporte talk about the "ideal society" they believe in.

Skeptics fear of flying

Few doctors or scientists doubt the stress-relieving benefits of TM. But other kinds of meditation — even lying down on a couch for 20 minutes twice a day — can bring the same benefits, some skeptics say.

Perhaps TM's chief detractor is Swami Vishnu Devananda, who runs a yoga camp in Val Morin, and founded International Sivananda Yoga centres. He has spent about $50,000 in advertising to warn the public about the 'false' claims by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, particularly in the area of levitation.

"What the Maharishi is doing is against our spiritual tradition. Levitation is commonly done by magicians in India but it is an optical illusion . . . Our ultimate goal is enlightenment, not levitation."

He, and others, say that levitation is merely a "trick" — a physical exercise of hopping — designed to lure the gullible into spending thousands of dollars on "advanced" courses that lead up to the "ultimate art" of flying.

And TM's so-called "secret" mantras — the word upon which one meditates — have come under attack.

The Maharishi has said that mantras are 'scientifically' chosen for each meditator, but former TM instructor Richard Scott claims that one of ten mantras is simply assigned according to the age and sex of the meditator.

Local TM instructor Doug Storey says emphatically: "Oh, I see people levitate all the time. I'm even practicing the technique myself . . .

Others are wary of the reams of pseudo-philosophical hype that appear in TM literature.

"Even though I meditate," says a disc jockey for CHOM-FM here, "I don't go along with the propaganda aspect of TM. I find a lot of it bogus and confusing.

"What I object to is the heavyhanded propaganda that you have to believe in everything Maharishi says in order to be a 'true' meditator."

TM's vast propaganda machine uses a combination of childish hyperbole "explanations" and others so complicated as to be virtually incomprehensible.

For instance, Dr. Brian Josephson's discoveries of "quantum tunnelling", which won him the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1974, has been used as a metaphor for TM:

"A phenomenon similar to the Josephson Effect of 'tunnelling' of an electric current through an insulating barrier between superconductors also occurs in society. Individuals practising the TM technique produce coherence in their individual consciousness and are found to generate orderliness and coherence in the collective consciousness of those around them by enlivening the field of infinite correlation on the level of pure consciousness . . .

Got that? It's the explanation for the "Maharishi Effect."

Believe it, and you will believe TM can save the world.

TM: Answer to searching '60s?

How does Red Storey, ex-footballer, referee and sports commentator, feel about his son being one of the principal organizers of the Montreal Transcendental Meditation movement?

"Well, he doesn't know all that much about it," says Doug Storey, co-ordinator of the West Montreal Corporation for an Ideal Society.

When I first started he was a bit perturbed, but after seven years of teaching, he thinks of my job as like any other."

Storey, 30, is one of four volunteers who live at TM's local headquarters, a three-floor house in Montreal West.

Like the others, he dresses in jacket and tie, keeps his hair trimmed and wears a perpetually smiling wide-eyed expression that goes along with an almost indefatigable energy.

Meetings at TM headquarters tend to have a childlike clubhouse atmosphere, with lots of self-congratulatory applause.

"In 1969 a friend of mine kept on telling me about TM, but I thought it was a rip-off. I had images of a guru with Rolls-Royces so I hesitated to start. After about six months I was still hearing about it, so I read a book on it and decided I had nothing to lose by looking into it.

"TM's effect on me was so immediate and profound that nine months later I was in Switzerland taking a teacher-training course.

"I guess I had an intuitive desire to grow in life. The 1960s was a great time for the generation that looked everywhere for solutions.

"We turned to politics, to music, to all kinds of ways to alter our reality. We forgot that one essential thing: Inner development."

A standard TM course costs $250 per family (including dependents under 21), $150 for an adult, $80 for a university student, $70 for a high school student and $40 for those age 10 to 14. There's also a special course for kids under 10.

The course takes four days, prefaced by two introductory lectures. On the first day one learns the technique, meditates and discusses the feeling with a teacher.

In the next three days, there are 90-minute sessions with a teacher to make sure one is assured about the meditation technique.

Storey organizes, gives lectures, and teaches — all for very little money.

"We don't draw salaries per se, but we do make enough to get by. We're not missionaries or zealots or martyrs, so we hope that society will recognize that TM is something so profound that people who teach it are worthy of some sort of government subsidy."

The money from TM courses, says Storey, "does not go into somebody's pocket or into investing. The money is funnelled back into teaching, into making videotapes and printing literature."

When asked how much money he makes, Storey said: "Well, we are a non-profit organization and operating costs — including payment for teaching — is taken from the lesson's fee. I don't get a salary per se, but I do eat three meals a day."

The course used to cost $60 to take; now it is $150. Why? "Our operating costs — such as making tapes, printing literature and operating research at our universities — have gone up enormously over the past few years."

The World Government does not print a public balance sheet, although Storey says that all financial statements regarding TM can be freely obtained from the organization's auditors, Coopers & Librar.

Storey's main aim in the new Quebec-wide "invincibility" campaign is to get the government to monitor the changes in society after the campaign.

He recently presented Quebec Education Minister Jacques-Yvan Morin with a collection of booklets and scientific data about TM in schools. More than 120 North American universities and high schools include TM courses in their curriculum.

Morin is reported to have said that the presentation was the most luxurious he had ever received. Although he hasn't started meditating, he did say he would look into the possibilities of using TM in the Quebec educational system.

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